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BOOKMARK

HILARY MASTERS
5:30 p.m. Thursday, June 22
Harold Washington Library Center
400 S. State St.
Author Hilary Masters will discuss and sign copies of his new book of essays, "In Montaigne's Tower."

Illustration by David Cochiaro

Tribune photo of an Illinois farm by Phil Greer

American memoir

An accident tears apart—and brings together—a farm family in southern Illinois

FROM OUR HOUSE
By Lee Martin
Dutton, 192 pages, $22.95

By Mary Swander

First you notice the photograph: a shot from around the late 1950s, father and young son, standing in their yard, an old oak tree behind them. The two, squinting into the summer sun, are in front of a farm gate, their two-story house in the background. All seems well in this bucolic scene until you look at the photo more closely. The father and son stand apart from each other. Their body language is stiff. What's significant is what's missing: the absence of any physical show of affection—the son leaning into his father's leg, the father's arms draped around his son's shoulders.

What's significant in Lee Martin's finely wrought memoir, "From Our House," are the absences in his story. At first glance, the photograph facing the title page suggests the typical tale. Ah, yes, you think. It's the abusive father versus the wounded, coming-of-age son. Yet, when you examine the scene

even more thoroughly, you realize that you've almost missed the point. While the son's eyes are downcast, his posture shy and withdrawn, the father stares straight on into the camera, arms sticking out from the sides of his torso, hooks rather than hands glinting in the light.

Martin's book begins with his father's accident—the loss of his hands to a corn picker. In an all-too-familiar rural scenario, we watch a man—Roy Martin—attempt to regroup and forge ahead after assimilating the blow of a farm injury. Roy spends time at a rehabilitation hospital, learning to strap on his hooks and work them well enough to scrawl a letter home to his wife and son: "Well my courage is picking up that I might get to come home some day."

Eventually Roy does go home to his farm in southern Illinois, taking the bus alone. Of course, now his happy life has changed forever. Husband, wife and son—this tight little nuclear family—must adjust to the physical, emotional and

Mary Swander is the author, most recently, of "Out of This World: A Journey of Healing."

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FICTION

Julia Alvarez's challenging tale of 2 women

By Luis Alberto Urrea

IN THE NAME OF SALOME
By Julia Alvarez
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 357 pages, $23.95

You will have to pay attention if you hope to enjoy this novel, a fictionalized history of Salome Ureña (1850-1897) and her daughter, Camila.

Ureña was the great poet of the Dominican Republic whose works stirred political and cultural upheavals at home and came to be revered in much of Latin America. Using a pen name, the young Salome published poems in her local newspapers. These poems developed into political broadsides and screeds, and as her art matured, its influence on the public spread, until some claimed Salome as a mother of revolutions. It is, perhaps, a Latino marvel, this war of poetry. It's hard to imagine the United States gripped by the upheavals of the newest Robert Bly haiku translation.

Salome casts a long shadow. The title of Julia Alvarez's novel, in fact, comes from the good-natured and sentimental heresy of Salome's daughter, Camila, a professor of literature. She often makes the sign of the cross, saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of my mother, Salome."

Having lost Salome when she was just a child, Camila struggles to live under the mighty resonance of her mother's memory. Far from boldly inspiring revolts—political or personal—she tries to keep her head down and trudge through revolutions that seem less intense and threatening, for all their own power. Camila moves in a world of feminist struggle. In many ways she is a solitary hero, as if she were battling her way through a myth. Education, identity, lesbianism, literacy, politics, race, paternalism, family—these are the battlegrounds the daughter inherits.

Suddenly, amazingly, this quiet women decides, late in life, that she must leave her home and join the Cuban revolution. In some ways, coming full circle, she enters the haunted territory of her mother.

Alvarez is the author of "How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents" (1991) and the stunning "In the Time of the Butterflies" (1994). The first book got far on charm. Hidden in its warmth, however, was a political message about identity and personhood. The message became manifest in "Butterflies," a fact-based novel that spiraled into frightening violence.

The new novel, an ambitious project, will impress fans of the previous books. But it could prove to be overly ambitious for some readers.

The novel unfolds through a double narrative. Half of the book is Salome's own, warmly narrated story. The other half is Camila's more distant, modern tale. Salome's story is told in a traditional-sounding, first-person voice—at once humble and audacious, charming and almost naive. If this weren't a novel firmly planted in the world of political danger and transformation, Salome could be a classic magic-realist heroine, somebody out of a Garcia Marquez book—a girl who might lift off the ground and fly away.

Mixed in with the details of Dominican family life in the 19th Century, however, are strong stirrings of feminist and political ideals. "The story of my life," she begins, "starts with the story of my country." Salome is born right after the country's declaration of independence, and her life neatly follows the struggle for statehood on the island. She is half black, a detail that affects the course of her life and complicates the weave of the story.

Camila's story is more troubling—not in its particulars, but in its conception. It is told in a more modern, third-person, present-tense narration, and Camila is in some sense the reverse of her mother. Her portion of the book begins, "She would like to ask her mother, 'What should I do now?'"

Whereas we meet Salome as a young girl, we meet Camila as an old woman. After long years of lone struggle, she has decided to leave for Cuba. Her mother's revolutionary ways have finally caught up with her, and she goes despite warnings that she should stay where she is.

Salome's story moves forward in time. Camila's story, in so many ways the opposite of her mother's, runs backward. We meet her in 1960. We next see her in 1950, then in 1941, and so on. A backward-moving narrative is a fine, if difficult, literary device (something an experimental scamp like Donald Barthelme might pull), but it asks a lot of a reader.

So we have a first-person narration moving chronologically forward, and a third-person narration moving chronologically backward. The ambition of the design becomes clear. Sooner or later, elements of the mother's and daughter's stories will have to cross. And they do: People who were dead in one chapter are thriving and healthy in the next; folks who are old and shaky on one page are young and frisky two pages later.

This either makes the book feel chaotic or it lends a dreamy timelessness to the text. A story so haunted by the past, so fraught with ghosts and echoes, finds itself full to the brim with various incarnations of the same people. Each character is two or three different people, depending on where in time we find her.

To keep the stories clear, Alvarez has divided the book so that Salome's and Camila's chapters alternate. Salome's chapter titles are in Spanish, while Camila's are in English. We are being told that we have a traditional Spanish novel and a modern American novel running simultaneously. The payoff comes at the end of the book, when both story lines converge in a heartrending climax.

One great disappointment is the curious absence of Salome's poems. It feels like an editorial decision—that an already challenging read would have been made more difficult by the inclusion of verse. But we come to hunger after her words, and the few snippets of them are not enough to satisfy us. We are often told of Salome's greatness, but we want to savor it for ourselves.

Because it takes some intellectual acrobatics to keep the stories straight, one could choose various reading strategies. For example, one might read the Spanish story, then the English. Or one could read the Spanish story start to finish, then read the English chapters from last to first, thus creating a standard time line.

However you read "In the Name of Salome," you can only feel admiration for the difficult and important work that Julia Alvarez is undertaking.

Luis Alberto Urrea's last book, "Nobody's Son: Notes From an American Life," won the 1999 American Book Award for nonfiction. He teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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